

## Thanksgiving “Thanking God this Year”

Fr. Frank Schuster

Ah, here we are. Thanksgiving! My family loves Thanksgiving so much that one day simply isn't enough. Last night was a gathering at the house of my brother and his wife for an epic pizza feed. Tonight will be at the house of my cousin and his wife, with about thirty of us there for a traditional turkey meal. The evening will run like a liturgy, with everyone in charge of something. My generation of guys are usually in charge of making the mashed potatoes. This is essentially accomplished by sprinkling a little potato dust onto a pound of butter. You get the idea. I am also a big fan of my brother's recipe for Brussel sprouts, which starts with a pound of bacon, you see, onto which you sprinkle a few Brussel sprouts. Ah, the gluttony. And if that isn't enough, tomorrow we will go to the house of my sister and her husband for a Bollywood Indian Food extravaganza. It is a recent tradition we have started and it is good. I have been blessed with a family that by and large gets along with each other regardless of different political views and even religions. We are not perfect by any stretch of the imagination but we do enjoy each other's company and are usually pretty good at keeping the peace. I wish that for everyone, although, I know that Thanksgiving dinner will be a challenge for a few families in our parish either because it always is a challenge trying to prevent fights from breaking out (alas, some families are simply that way) or because the election this year might have a way of causing conversations to go awry. I was amazed at how many news sites out there had stories about how to survive thanksgiving dinner this year due to the election. And, it is really too bad, because at the heart of this uniquely American holiday is the opportunity we have to give thanks to God for the amazing blessings we have been given, not to pick fights with family members.

I mention this because St. Paul has a remedy for dealing with potential anti-social thanksgiving behavior in our second reading. Think of this reading from St. Paul this morning as an inoculation, a kind of like a flu shot to prevent potential disaster tonight. This is what St. Paul suggests, he says, “put on heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you must also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body. And be thankful.” That is what he says. That's pretty good advice for Thanksgiving dinner, don't you think?

Of course, whenever Thanksgiving comes around, I always think it is good to reflect on to whom we are giving thanks. Don't you think? To whom should we thank for the blessings we received as a people, as a country? It is good to remember that, for religious folks like us, Thanksgiving isn't about giving thanks to ourselves; thanksgiving is about giving thanks to God. However, I also think it is also good manners to thank the cook!

As you know, every year, it is a tradition for the President of the United States to give a Thanksgiving proclamation. Guess who wrote the beginning of this one. I think it is especially appropriate this year. It begins.

“The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.”

There is a lot of wisdom there! Thank you Abraham Lincoln! He wrote this during the Civil War. Talk about an awkward Thanksgiving! What got them through that holiday was the recognition that, although Thanksgiving is a wonderful national holiday, they also understood Thanksgiving as a religious holiday. For George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, Thanksgiving was about giving thanks to God for the blessings God has given our country. It is a good reminder to not make the mistake of turning this holiday into a day where we end up thanking ourselves and forgetting God altogether.

Our Gospel reading today accentuates this point, ten lepers were healed by Christ, nine of them thanked themselves, one returned to give thanks to Christ from whom all blessings flow. The one that returns to give thanks is the foreigner and I think this is an important point. How often it is that it is the foreigner or outsider who was invited into a family gathering that ends up being the most grateful for the invitation? Something to think about.

You see, my friends, this Gospel reading underscores the importance of gratitude in the spirit life. Gratitude is such at the heart of Christian living that even the word Eucharist comes from the Greek word meaning thanksgiving. At the heart of Christian worship is the need to be thankful to God and to each other; never taking anybody for granted, especially those who are closest to us. Secular culture tempts us to spend this Holiday thanking ourselves for our blessings. I therefore challenge us all today to begin our thanksgiving dinner with a prayer of thanksgiving to God in a spirit of love and kindness for the others at the table; perhaps every person in the family can have an opportunity during this prayer time to pray aloud one thing that they are grateful to God for. And, please, please, this is not the time to pick a fight or a time to take the bait for a fight. This is a time to be grateful to God and to each other. It is also a time to remember the empty chairs of those who are not there, by distance or by death. It is also a time to thank our public servants, especially our men and women in uniform in our community or throughout the world, who can't be home this year for Thanksgiving. It is also a time to remember the grieving, the lonely, the hungry and the poor that they may receive our love and support. Most of all, it is a time to invite God into our homes this evening and give Him thanks for every blessing he bestows upon our families and our nation, through Christ our Lord. Amen.